

## **WHO ARE MY EDUCATION STUDENTS AND WHO ARE THEY TO BECOME AS FUTURE TEACHERS?: EDUCATIONAL FOUNDATIONS AND THE SOCIALIZATION OF PROSPECTIVE TEACHERS**

**David Granger**

### **Introduction**

When exploring a very broad topic in a very specific context, as I will be today, one is I think wise to focus his commentary on the significant traits of his own immediate environment, rather than venturing a full topographical map of the entire terrain. For others' paths through this same terrain will doubtless reveal a somewhat different set of attending features, of particular obstacles encountered and prospects for overcoming them. It is often the case, too, that these features change markedly with the passage of time. I am assuming that the complex terrain of teacher education policies, programs and practices is no exception.

The following paper was conceived and written with precisely this idea in mind. It poses, whether directly or indirectly, substantially more questions concerning the relationship between educational foundations and the socialization of prospective teachers than it ever intends to answer, much less resolve. Nor does the paper pretend to broach all of the questions that might be worth asking on the subject. I do, however, have in mind to try and identify here a few common traits of my current teacher education students, traits which, in tandem with those of recent trends in teacher education, should I believe concern those of us committed to the purposes of educational foundations. It is my hope that at least some of these traits will resonate with features of your own experience, and perhaps serve as both guideposts and a catalyst for further thought and discussion.

## **My Immediate Environment**

This past fall semester, my first at SUNY Geneseo, proved to be at once eye-opening and a considerable challenge to my skills as a teacher. More than once I found myself reduced to a state of perplexity, not unlike a hiker who diligently ascends the sides of a tall mountain, marking every step along the way, only to find that the trail suddenly dissolves half way up. Surely all of us have been faced with situations in the classroom that seem to defy in some perplexing way our most careful planning and expectations. Maybe this is even more the norm than the exception. And yet there are times, though they are less frequent, when such ostensibly minor incidences seem to point to larger social and cultural matters; more specifically, for those of us who are teacher educators, to important questions about just who our students are and who they are to become as future teachers. Here is how all of this unfolded for me.

My chief responsibility at Geneseo involves teaching the well-established undergraduate course entitled “Social Foundations of American Education.” It is a course required of all students pursuing teacher certification. There were seventy or so students in my two sections this fall, most of them sophomores. Early on in the semester our main course text casually raised the familiar issue of “teaching to the test.” Sharing the authors’ expectations, I had supposed that my students would to a person quickly find this idea problematic, if not for various reasons inherently miseducative. I was wrong. Not only were several of them surprised to learn that teaching to the test is widely considered miseducative as well as ethically suspect by foundations people, they were also noticeably unnerved by it. For them, I eventually came to see, not teaching to the test in the educational milieu in which they had been socialized is almost as disconcerting as the absence of traditional letter grades had seemed to me when I was in school. Several students even felt it a teacher’s duty to teach to the test — namely, the high-stakes standardized achievement kind — and from where they sat, could supply very compelling arguments to that effect. Likewise, others earnestly wondered whether teaching

to the test might not actually be a necessity if teachers are to satisfy expanding accountability initiatives. This is when I first began seriously to ask, as William James would have it, “Who are my students and who are they to become as future teachers?”

There is I gather nothing remarkable or out of the ordinary about these questions; they would seem indispensable to the mind-set of any reflective practitioner. Still, they had appeared to me extremely pressing at the time. This is no doubt partly because I was teaching at my third very different academic institution in three years, and with three rather different cohorts of education students. My old habits and presumptions were understandably conflicting with my new environment.<sup>1</sup>

And yet there was clearly more to it than that. I was also feeling an increasingly acute sense of my responsibilities as a foundations instructor — and a gnawing sense of the obstacles before me if I was to meet these responsibilities and help my students along the path to becoming reflective practitioners of teaching. Moreover, these only grew as the semester progressed. I soon noticed that provocative discussion questions easily became the vehicles of mere information exchanges, the class making sure that they had accurately recorded every last word that ostensibly received my stamp of approval. Small group work, where the students were to investigate topic areas amongst themselves while I moved around the room offering assistance, often produced anxieties redolent of Meno’s Paradox: “How can we be sure that we’re getting everything right?” “How do we know when we’ve got it all?” “We can’t find the answers to our topic in the textbook?” (The topics often required that the students draw inferences from the readings.) Or, perhaps most revealing, “I’m not comfortable having to depend on my other group members for what I’m supposed to be learning?” As much as I worked to disabuse the students of this Meno-like posture, I still somehow felt obliged to review methodically each topic area with the entire class before moving on to the next chapter.

*Who are My Education Students and Who are They to Become as Future Teachers? Educational Foundations and the Socialization of Prospective Teachers*

I did admittedly discover that the majority of Geneseo's education students are very amicable, highly conscientious and academically inclined; they know how to "play the game" and are willing to "follow the rules," is how I would put it. The reverse side of this, though, is that many are naturally reticent in the classroom, almost apolitical, suffer from intense grade and test anxiety, and are not comfortable taking any sort of risks with their course work.<sup>2</sup> Who, once again, are these students to become as future teachers? How compatible is the socialization which they have previously received, and that awaiting them in the next couple of years, with critical-creative democratic teaching? How can such teaching be achieved with dispositions and skills so acclimated to the "what" and "how" of education to the general neglect of the "why"? Is the current direction of teacher education policy and practice likely either to challenge or reinforce this orientation? And most importantly for present purposes, how can I best make sense of and address the popular yet parochial attitudes and "accepted meanings" (Dewey's term) as to what teaching and learning are about that so many students bring with them to my foundations class?

### **Dewey on the Constitution of the Self**

John Dewey encourages us to envision the self as a continual work-in-progress. It is not to be thought of as a fixed Cartesian entity (subject), situated and constituted independently from its actions and ends, standing over and against the world (object). The self is better seen as an activity or constellation of behaviors, Dewey offers, a means of organizing and making sense of experience rather than a mental substance *which* acts. It is an ongoing event that emerges and, one hopes (it may deeply fragment or become encased in a shell of addled routine), expands or grows through interaction with the social and cultural word. Consequently, self-realization is no more guaranteed than any other of life's goods.

Dewey's take on this emergent self is a natural extension of his theory of habits, those waiting-to-be-expressed "working capacities"

of the individual (Dewey, 1922, MW 14: 21). Indeed, in Dewey's eyes we are truly creatures of habit; there is no pre- or asocial core self that is always (already) there, independent and autonomous. Habits for Dewey actively condition all that is apprehended through the senses, be it seeing and hearing or touching, tasting, and smelling. They govern our dispositions, desires and ends, as well as our abilities to care, perceive and think. This means that habits are a ubiquitous feature of everyday life and need not have the negative connotation often assumed today. They do incorporate such things as smoking and over-eating, yet also include patterns of linguistic behavior and problem-solving techniques. In short, habits are social functions and social phenomena. Their formation and composition cannot be reduced to the activities of individual persons, but are just as determined by the environment — an environment replete with social meaning and significance. "Habits incorporate an environment within themselves," Dewey wants us to understand. "They are adjustments *of* the environment, not merely *to* it" (Dewey, 1922, MW 14: 38). Thus habit is first and foremost an expression of culture rooted in the lived body.

Dewey then goes on to characterize habits as "arts." When intelligently developed and flexibly responsive, he suggests, they at once simplify and enhance our ability to act meaningfully with the environment. Habit as a "vital art" is a "kind of human activity which is influenced by prior activity and in that sense acquired; which contains within itself a certain ordering or systematization of minor elements of action; which is projective, dynamic in quality, ready for overt manifestation; and which is operative in some subdued subordinate form [e.g. predispositions] even when not obviously dominating activity" (Dewey, 1922, MW 14: 31).

Of course, as teachers know perhaps better than anyone, many of our habits unfortunately have neither the traits of artfulness nor of intelligence, though they constitute a formidable portion of our everyday dispositions and behaviors. We contract them haphazardly or by gradual assimilation in the process of socialization, often as a kind

of cultural inheritance from those who came before us. (Hence culture has us before we have it.) This inheritance is surely a necessary and in myriad instances beneficial resource for self-realization. But either way, Dewey tells us, the extent to which intelligence plays a direct role in the development of habits determines the degree to which they lend themselves to varied and elastic use. A beginning teacher, for example, learns how to deal with a variety of classroom contingencies by appealing to different patterns of response, such as those encountered in a classroom management course. These response patterns must however manifest habits admitting some degree of flexibility if she is not to become what Dewey calls “a wooden and perfunctory pedagogue” (Dewey, 1934, *LW 10*: 267).

Dewey therefore also recognizes that certain types of activities and environments tend to lead to the formation of fewer and more inflexible habits in ways that contract the self, while others help it to expand. This is because the self’s ability to act meaningfully depends upon acknowledging and establishing many and diverse connections with the environment. If the activities initiated or supported by the environment spawn habits which limit the self’s ability to make and expand these connections — as seems the case with some of the previous schooling experiences of my education students — it becomes incapable of responding intelligently to new conditions and circumstances. Intelligence gives way to bare routine and new situations are forced into the template of the old. But “the welfare of others, like our own,” Dewey says, “consists in a widening and deepening of the perceptions that give activity its meaning, in an educative growth” (Dewey, 1922, *MW 14*: 202).

The working capacities constituting our habits are nevertheless essentially provisional. In fact, since every situation we find ourselves in is somewhat unique, our habits are constantly undergoing minor adjustments without our really being aware of it (Dewey, 1922, *MW 14*: 30). And while it is often practicable (and admittedly tempting) to seek the shelter of habit when faced with uncertain environments, at other times it is either virtually or wholly impossible. Our continued existence inevitably throws us into situations which bar

crucial habits from their normal paths. These can result from changes both to the self and to the environment: eating habits begin to clash with decreasing body metabolism. Novel situations can also cause several preexisting habits to come into conflict with one another: a teacher is suddenly forced to reconcile her sense of responsibility towards her students with her allegiance to school policy and administration. When this occurs the habitual self calls for reconstruction through conscious, informed deliberation. Dewey refers to this process as involving “a dramatic rehearsal (in imagination) of various competing lines of action” (Dewey, 1922, *MW 14*: 132). Dramatic rehearsal gives us the opportunity to experiment safely, “by tentative rehearsals in thought,” with alternative possible ways of resolving blocked and conflicted habits (Dewey, 1922, *MW 14*: 133). When we choose and begin to act on one of these alternatives, we do not just change the environing conditions; we are on the path, for better or for worse, to a next self.

However Dewey also warns us that it would be a grave error to treat “the old, the habitual self...as if it were *the* self; as if new conditions and new demands were [inevitably] something foreign and hostile” (Dewey, 1932, *LW 7*: 307). For this relatively static, attained self of past experience functions best in conjunction with a transitional, dynamic self. Only then does its critical temporal dimension come adequately to light. Dewey writes:

The growing, enlarging, liberated self...goes forth to meet new demands and occasions, and readapts and remakes itself in the process. It welcomes untried situations. The necessity for choice between the interests of the old and of the forming, moving, self is recurrent. It is found at every stage of civilization and every period of life. (Ibid)

The self, in its amalgam of the static and dynamic, must of necessity relinquish its current make-up if it is to expand substantially its palette of meaning-enhancing ways of interacting with the environment. In other words, self-making is only an initial step along the

eventual path to self-remaking, entailing reciprocating activity within and beyond the habitual self. And as Dewey intimated above, this involves a disposition that can be mindfully, if not easily or effortlessly, pursued. In *Experience and Nature* he dubs it “cultivated naiveté” (Dewey, 1925, *LW 1*: 40). It is the disposition of the reflective practitioner — the liberated-liberating self.

Dewey explains cultivated naiveté this way:

We cannot permanently divest ourselves of the intellectual habits we take on and wear when we assimilate the culture of our own time and place. But intelligent furthering of culture demands that we take some of them off, that we inspect them critically to see what they are made of and what wearing them does to us. We cannot achieve recovery of primitive naiveté. But there is attainable a cultivated naiveté of eye, ear and thought, one that can be acquired only through the discipline of severe thought. (Ibid)

This, I would submit, is Dewey’s cultural hermeneutics: an interpretive dialectic between self and world that resists closure. Unlike a lot of contemporary critical theory, though, it is more a hermeneutics of replenishment than of suspicion. Cultivated naiveté is first and foremost a restorative activity, one expressly conceived to recover and critically renew our relations with the features of our experience. Dewey is looking to increase our sensitivity to interpretations of events other than those that might seem the most obvious or comfortable to make. Yet he clearly does not want us to mistake this for a passive or primitive posture either — it requires a rigorous act of “intellectual disrobing” (Ibid). Cultivated naiveté entails being open-minded not empty-minded, interested not indifferent, while investigating our intellectual habits through a receptivity and sense of responsibility to formerly neglected aspects of the experiential landscape. Here, then, lie the dispositional traits, knowledge and skills that I aspire to inculcate in my students and that underwrite my sense of purpose as a foundations instructor.

## Current Trends in Teacher Education and the Fate of the Reflective Practitioner

In a recent book entitled *Creating Democratic Classrooms: The Struggle to Integrate Theory & Practice* (1996), Landon Beyer discerns the following about current trends in teacher education policy and practice. The disparity or even antagonism between Dewey's "cultivated naïveté" and what Beyer terms the continued "deskilling" of teachers is, I think, worthy of our concern:

[T]here is more than a little similarity between the normal school training of the last century and the practices of contemporary teacher education programs — including some proposals for their reform. Teacher education programs have become more field-based, partly through the mandates of state departments of education. Student teaching has become an apparently universal component of teacher preparation. And since some kind of classroom proficiency is a requirement for teachers, this is both understandable and appropriate. Increasingly, however, educational regulatory bodies are mandating extensive experience in schools as a prerequisite to student teaching. As a result of such mandates, teacher educators have created practica, classroom observation modules, and field-based courses or course components, and have encouraged student-mentor relationships involving public school teachers. The rationale for *these activities is often well-intentioned. Yet it seems likely that one outcome is the unreflective socialization of prospective teachers into the accepted norms, mores, and folkways of the profession as it is currently practiced.* (Beyer, 1996, p.6, my emphasis)

According to this conservative, functionalist orientation, one aimed at facilitating students' "fit" with the current realities of schooling, "teacher education is concerned with helping prospective teach-

ers acquire appropriate techniques and strategies, manage and monitor classroom interactions, ensure academic achievement (largely through test scores of one sort or another), and create activities that are socially desirable and developmentally appropriate” (Beyer, 1996, p.5). And the more intensive this functionalist orientation becomes, one would surmise, the more prominent and entrenched become those habits and beliefs about schooling that prospective teachers acquired during their previous education. And yet, I want to say, as Shakespeare’s Hamlet puts it, “there’s the rub.” For it would seem too that the less time education students spend practicing cultivated naiveté and examining alternatives to the current features of schooling, expanding their working sense of the possible meanings of teaching and learning, the more likely their future selves (as teachers) will be circumscribed by the past, their liberated-liberating selves constrained and constraining. Thus, for instance, my Geneseo students might well come to accept as a given (if they do not already) the realities of “teaching to the test,” official knowledge, social control and institutional efficiency, mandated objectives, and tooth-and-claw competition — all of which I believe go against the grain of critical-creative democratic teaching. In such an environment a lot, indeed, would apparently rest with the fate of educational foundations.

Regrettably, though, the irony that the increased professionalization of teaching could potentially disable the reflective practitioner is overlooked in many of the recent calls for teacher education reform. But this should not come as any great surprise. Ours has since its inception been a culture more amenable to the “doer” than the “thinker,” to the practitioner than the theorist. And our students come to class having been so acculturated (or habituated), despite Dewey’s constant reminders that this is ultimately an invidious distinction, and no matter who or what is at fault.<sup>3</sup> Ours is also a culture which for several reasons has historically shown more than a little distrustful paternalism towards those who educate our children and, I would add, our teachers. As Beyer tells it, then, “[f]rom the normal school movement of the 19th century to the more contemporary concern for providing ‘survival skills’ to future teachers,

to the call for deinstitutionalization of teacher education in favor of a school-based apprenticeship system, programs that have fostered theoretical insight and inquiry have frequently been dismissed as lacking in useful knowledge or as too destabilizing” (Ibid). In other words, such programs provide teacher education students with too much of what they don’t need and too little of what they do need, as articulated by a group of “experts,” to function effectively in the classroom. As people working in foundations, we have all probably seen or experienced for ourselves the myopic instrumentalism embedded in these social conventions and ideological constructs. To what extent, I want to ask, is it to constitute our students’ future selves?

I have recently learned that educational foundations at SUNY Geneseo is not immune to these same conventions and constructs. Moreover, they also come at us from the other side, as it were — that of the privileging of theory over practice which typifies the Western liberal arts tradition. Here is a recent example.

As new state regulations and requirements have made our revised teacher education programs somewhat more concentrated and less flexible than in years past, several members of the college faculty have voiced concerns that, if these programs are approved, education students will no longer have the opportunity to obtain the well-roundedness of the “Geneseo experience.” Some of the proposed solutions to this perceived problem entail, among other space-saving measures, reducing “Social Foundations of American Education” to a two credit course, absorbing its content into other courses, or dropping it altogether. Ironically, but again not surprisingly, it has been suggested that students do not really need educational foundations to do their jobs effectively (given the current realities of schooling), that it does not (or could not) contribute significantly to students’ well-roundedness, and that it can always be “picked up” at the master’s level. I hope with Dewey’s help to have underscored the perhaps increasing danger that this kind of thinking poses to teacher education. As one of my students wrote in a paper a couple of months ago, “One of a teacher’s main goals in the classroom should be to get her

*Who are My Education Students and Who are They to Become as Future Teachers? Educational Foundations and the Socialization of Prospective Teachers*

students to be informed critical-thinkers. I see now how impossible this is if teachers never learn to do this themselves.”

Before offering a few concluding comments of my own, I would like to speak briefly about one of my recent efforts to overcome the obstacles to cultivating liberated-liberating selves which I experienced last fall.

The very first assignment that I gave my students spring semester was to write a three page “self-profile.” These profiles were to explore items such as the characteristic traits of the students’ home communities and schools, their social and academic experiences in school, their notions of the means and ends of schooling, and their beliefs concerning the degree to which their schools accomplished these ends. I then asked the students to refer to their self-profiles in writing a series of four response papers over the course of the term. They are able develop their paper topics individually from a dozen or so case studies discussed in class, most of which are directed to issues of diversity and equity. (I realized that they would likely select topics that they already had strong opinions about. But this is exactly what I wanted.) As a leading requirement, however, the students must in each paper use their self-profiles to reflect on why they chose their specific topics, how they think their past experiences might have influenced their responses to these topics, what this could mean for the kinds of teachers they might become, the imagined strengths and weaknesses of these projected future selves as critical-creative democratic teachers, and lastly, how any perceived weaknesses might be addressed through our class and over the next few years. Given what I have seen thus far, I am expecting that most of the students will have gotten the hang of this by the end of the semester.

In any event, I certainly cannot make any grand claims for this sort of exercise in cultivated naiveté. It obviously has significant limitations; not the least of which being the easy but false presumption that one can ever become fully and objectively present to oneself. Nonetheless, the exercise has I think given the students a way to

begin to come-to-know themselves in relation to their culture as I come-to-know them. And it has provided them a sympathetic space for situating inquiry into teaching within the context of at times discomforting self-criticism, unsettling the world as they now see and acknowledge it. Perhaps most importantly, however, they are beginning to understand that the path to personal and cultural renewal is a long, slow, and twisted one, with many stops and starts, and that growth necessarily involves loss in the form of old habits, beliefs, associations, projects, and customs.

### **Conclusion**

As I stated at the outset, there are I believe no easy resolutions to the questions and concerns raised in this paper. And this is only complicated by the fact that the issues involved can both look and be very different from place to place and from time to time. My aim was thus simply to try and articulate my sense of purpose as a foundations instructor, and briefly to map and interpret some of the obstacles that I recently experienced in seeking to fulfill this purpose as a newcomer to SUNY Geneseo. And, again, I would hope that my efforts to negotiate these obstacles might offer a few welcomed guideposts for others working to scout a path through similar terrain.

Teacher education policies and programs that readily lure our students towards the comfortable and the commonsensical short-circuit opportunities for critical engagement. But “if we are to avoid such instrumentalism,” as Beyer writes, “teacher educators must provide opportunities for reflection on current school practice and the ends it serves, as well as support for articulating alternative practices that respect students’ integrity as moral beings and their abilities as social actors” (Beyer, 1996, p.15). The role of educational foundations in this is not I think to furnish prospective teachers with a fixed body of knowledge, concepts, or ideas, but to help them cultivate the requisite attitudes and attributes to negotiate their own way intelligently through the contingent realities of schooling. For the current reality, with the peremptory demands and expectations it places on students and teachers (and often in the name of “equality”), must

*Who are My Education Students and Who are They to Become as Future Teachers? Educational Foundations and the Socialization of Prospective Teachers*

inevitably influence who our students are and who they are to become as future teachers. This, whether we choose fully to acknowledge it or not.

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### Notes

1. The School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC) is a modestly-sized, private fine arts school conferring, among other things, much-esteemed MFA degrees and also possessing well-respected teacher education programs. The education students, undergraduate and graduate, are by-and-large not strong academically, though on occasion fiercely (if somewhat facetiously) political and are quick to offer opinions on even the most controversial of issues. The University of Chicago, in contrast, is a relatively large, private research university with a marginally diverse student population. Its sole investment in teacher education consists (or did until recently) in a smallish but reputable MAT/MST program. The education students are basically comfortable with academic pursuits and likewise offer opinions freely on a myriad of topics. (I should add that both SAIC and Chicago students were in my experience unanimously critical of the idea of “teaching to the test.”) SUNY Geneseo, as many of you know, is a public liberal arts college with selected professional and graduate programs. It contains a sizeable contingent of teacher education students, most from white middle and upper-middle class families. The students pride themselves on having finished near the top of their high school classes and many received high scores on their SATs.
2. All of these observations have been echoed in conversations with several of my Geneseo colleagues, a couple of whom have been at the college for a number of years. In stark contrast with the traits observed above, the College Honors Program calls for students who “are willing to take risks and are not obsessed with their grade point averages.”
3. In a little-read essay entitled “The Relation of Theory to Practice in Education,” Dewey offers a powerful critique of teacher education programs based on an apprenticeship model and which countenance the separation of theory and practice (Dewey, 1904, MW 3).

### End Notes

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